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Why Lacan Is Not a

“Post-Structuralist”

“There isn’t any metalanguage”

Today everybody knows that “there isn’t any metalanguage.” This is a commonplace found not only in Lacan’s psychoanalysis but also in post-structuralism (Derrida) and in contemporary hermeneutics (Gadamer). However, it is usually lost from view how Lacan’s theory treats this proposition in a way that is completely incompatible with post-structuralism, as well as hermeneutics.

While post-structuralism claims to describe a disjunction or gap within a text, in fact, the assumption that “there is no metalanguage,” leads the post-structuralist, who has supposedly deconstructed truth, to the contradictory position of asserting the “truth” that the text can find a point of conjunction in its own commentary. In this context, the interpretation of a literary text resides on the same plane as its “object.” Thus, the interpretation is included in the literary corpus. But there is no “pure” literary object that would not comprise an element of interpretation, of distance towards its immediate meaning. In poststructuralism the classical opposition between the object-text and its external interpretative reading is thus replaced by a continuity of an infinite literary text which is always already its own reading; that is, which includes a distance towards itself. That is why the poststructuralist procedure *par excellence* is not only to search in purely literary texts for propositions containing a theory about their own functioning, but also to read theoretical texts themselves as “literature,” more precisely, to put in parentheses their claim to truth in order to expose the textual mechanisms producing the “truth effect.” As Habermas has already pointed out, in post-structuralism we have a kind of universalized aesthetisation where “truth” itself is finally reduced to one of the style-effects of the discursive articulation.’ Different than this Nietzschean reference of post-structuralism, Lacan’s

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work makes almost no references to Nietzsche. Lacan always insists on psychoanalysis as a truth-experience. But his thesis that truth is structured like a fiction has nothing at all to do with a post-structuralist reduction of the truth-dimension to a textual “truth-effect.” Actually, it was Levi-Strauss who, in spite of his ferocious critique of the “poststructuralist fashion,” opened the way to a “deconstructivist” poeticism by reading theoretical interpretations of myths as new versions of the same myth. For example, he conceived Freud’s theory of the Oedipus-complex as just a new variation of the Oedipus-myth.

In “post-structuralism,” metonymy obtains a clear logical predominance over metaphor. The metaphorical “cut” is conceived as an effort doomed to fail, doomed to stabilize, canalize, or dominate the metonymical dissipation of the textual stream. In this perspective, the Lacanian insistence on the primacy of metaphor over metonymy, his thesis that metonymical sliding must always be supported by a metaphorical cut, can only appear to post- structuralists as an indication that his theory is still marked by the “metaphysics of presence.” Post-structuralists see the Lacanian theory of the *point de capiton*, of the phallic signifier as the signifier of lack, as an effort to master and restrain the “dissemination” of the textual process. Is it not, they say, an attempt to localize a lack in a single signifier, the One, although it is the signifier of lack itself? Derrida repeatedly reproaches Lacan for the paradoxical gesture of reducing lack through its affirmation of itself. Lack is localized in a point of exception which guarantees the consistency of all the other elements, by the mere fact that it determines “Symbolic castration,” by the mere fact that the phallus is defined as its signifier.

Even on the level of a naive “immediate” reading, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that in this post-structuralist position, something is amiss or, more precisely, that this criticism of Lacan runs a little bit too smoothly. A post-structuralist position repeats continually that no text could be totally metaphysical or totally non-metaphysical. On the one hand, it is not possible to get rid of the metaphysical tradition by a simple gesture, of simply taking distance, of placing oneself outside it, because the language we are obliged to use is penetrated by metaphysics. But, on the other hand, every text, however metaphysical it may be, always produces gaps which announce the breaches in the metaphysical circle: the points where the textual process subverts what its “author” intended to say. Is such a position not just a little bit too convenient? To put it more rudely, the position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that “there isn’t any

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metalanguage,” that no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say; that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance, is **the position of metalanguage** in its purest, most radical form.

How can one not recognize in the passionate zeal with which the post-structuralist insists that every text, his own included, is caught in a fundamental ambiguity and flooded with the “dissemination” of the inter-textual process, the signs of an obstinate **denial** (in the Freudian sense of *Verneinung*): a barely hidden acknowledgement of the fact that one is speaking from a safe position, a position not menaced by the de-centered textual process? That is why poststructuralist poeticism is ultimately **affected**. The whole effort to write “poetically,” to make us feel how our own text is already caught in a de-centered network of plural processes and how this textual process always subverts what we “intended to say,” the whole effort to evade the purely theoretical form of exposing our ideas and to adopt rhetorical devices usually reserved to literature, masks the annoying fact that at the basis of what they are saying, there is a clearly defined theoretical position which can be articulated without any trouble in a pure and simple metalanguage. The grand post-structuralist assumption is that the classical reduction of rhetorical devices to external means which do not concern the signified contents is illusionary. The so-called stylistic devices already determine the “inner” notional contents themselves. Yet it seems as if post-structuralist poetic style itself, the style of continuous ironic self-commentary and self-distance, the way of constantly subverting what one was supposed to say literally, exists only to embellish some basic theoretical propositions. That is why poststructuralist commentaries often produce an effect of “bad infinity” in the Hegelian sense: an endless quasi-poetical variation of the same theoretical assumption, a variation which does not produce anything new. The problem with deconstruction, then, is not that it renounces a strict theoretical formulation and yields to a flabby poeticism. It is, on the contrary, that its position is **too “theoretical”** (in the sense of a theory which excludes the truth-dimension; that is, which does not affect the place from where we speak).

The phallic signifier

How can we, then, elude this deadlock? It is here that Lacan differs radically from post-structuralists. In *Seminar XI*, he begins one of his sentences: “But this is precisely what I want to say and what I’m saying-because what I want to say is what I’m saying . . .” In a post

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structuralist reading, such phrases prove that Lacan still wants to retain the position of Master: “saying what I wanted to say,” supposedly lays claim to a coincidence between what we intend to say and what we are effectively saying. Post- structuralists ask if this is not what defines the illusion of the Master? Is Lacan not proceeding, then, as if his own text is exempt from the gap between what is said and what he intends to say? Is he not claiming he can dominate the signifying effects of his text? In the Lacanian perspective it is, on the contrary, precisely such “impossible” utterances-utterances following the logic of the paradox “I’m lying”-which keep the fundamental gap of the signifying process open and in this way prevent us from assuming a metalanguage-position. Lacan is close to Brecht here. One has only to remember the basic procedure of Brecht’s “learning plays” of the early thirties where the *dramatis personae pronounce* an

“impossible” commentary on their own acts. An actor enters the stage and says: “I’m a capitalist whose aim is to exploit workers. Now I will try to convince one of my workers of the truth of the bourgeois ideology which legitimizes the exploitation . . .” Then he approaches the worker and does exactly what he had announced he would do. Does such a procedure—an actor commenting on his deeds from an “objective” position of pure metalanguage—not make it clear, in an almost palpable way, the utter impossibility of occupying this position? Is it not, in its very absurdity, infinitely more subversive than the poeticism which prohibits every direct, simple utterance and feels obliged to always add new comments, retreats, digressions, brackets, quotation marks . . . ; so many assurances that what we are saying is not to be taken directly or literally, as identical to itself . . . ?

Metalanguage is not just an Imaginary entity. It is Real in the strict Lacanian sense. That is, it is impossible to occupy its position. But, Lacan adds, it is even more difficult to simply avoid it. One cannot **attain** it, but one also cannot escape it. That is why the only way to avoid the Real is to produce an utterance of pure metalanguage which, by its patent absurdity, materializes its own impossibility; that is, a paradoxical element which, in its very identity embodies absolute otherness, the irreparable gap, that makes it impossible to occupy a metalanguage position. For Derrida, the localization of the lack in its mark is supposed to tame the “dissemination” of the process of writing while, for Lacan, only the presence of such a paradoxical “at least one” sustains the radical dimension of the gap. The Lacanian name of

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this paradoxical element is, of course, the phallus as a signifier, a kind of negative version of “truth as the index of itself.” The phallic signifier is, so to speak, an index of its own impossibility. It is, in its very positivity, the signifier of “castration”; that is, of its own lack. The so-called pre-phallic objects (breasts, excrements) are lost objects, while the phallus is not simply lost but is an object which **gives body to a certain fundamental loss in its presence itself. In the phallus, loss as such attains a positive existence.** Here Lacan differs from Jung to whom has been attributed—wrongly perhaps, but *se non a vero, a ben trovato*—the famous phrase: “What is a penis but a phallic symbol?”

Let us also recall Otto Fenichel’s interpretation of the obscene gesture called in German “the long nose” (*die lange Nase*). *Spreading* the fingers in front of the face and putting the thumb on the nose supposedly connotes the erected phallus. The message of this gesture would be a simple showing off before the adversary: look how great mine is; mine is greater than yours. Instead of refuting this simplistic interpretation directly, Fenichel introduces a small displacement: the logic of insulting an adversary always involves **imitating** one of his/her features. If such is the case, what, then, should be so insulting in an imitation which points out that the other has a great and powerful virile member? Fenichel’s solution is that one has to read this gesture as the first part of a sentence, the second part of which is omitted. The whole of it reads: “Yours is so great and powerful, **but in spite of that, you’re impotent. You cannot hurt me with it.**” This way, the adversary is caught in a veil of castration. If he can’t, he can’t. But even if he can, any attesting of his power is already doomed to function as a denial; that is, as a masking of his fundamental impotence, as a mere showing-off which just confirms in a negative way that he can’t do anything. The more he reacts, the more he shows his power, the more his impotence is confirmed. It is in this precise sense that the phallus is the signifier of castration. This is the logic of the phallic inversion which sets in when the demonstration of power starts to function as a confirmation of a fundamental impotence. This is also the logic of the so-called political provocation addressed against the totalitarian powerstructure. The punker’s imitating the “sado-masochistic” power-ritual is not to be conceived as a case of the victim’s identification with the aggressor (as it is usually interpreted). The message to the powerstructure is, on the contrary, the negation implied in the positive act of imitation: You are so powerful, **but for all that, you are impotent.** You

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can’t really hurt me! In this way, the power-structure is caught in the same trap. The more violent its reaction, the more it confirms its fundamental impotence.

“Lenin in Warsaw” as object

To articulate more precisely the way the Lacanian phallic signifier entails the impossibility of metalanguage, let us return to the poststructuralist understanding of the idea that “there isn’t any metalanguage.” Its starting point is the fact that the zero level of all metalanguages—natural, ordinary language—is at the same time the last interpretative framework of all of them: that is the ultimate metalanguage. Ordinary language is its own metalanguage. It is self-referential; the place of an incessant autoreflexive movement. In this conceptualization one does not mention the object too much. Usually, one gets rid of it by simply pointing out how “reality” is already structured through the medium of language. This way post-structuralists can calmly leave themselves to the infinite self-interpretative play of language. “There isn’t any metalanguage” is actually taken, then, to mean **its exact opposite: that there is not any pure object-language**, any language that would function as a purely transparent medium for the designation of the pre-given reality. Every “objective” statement about things includes some kind of self-distance, a rebounding of the signifier from its “literal meaning.” Language is always saying more or less, in short, something other than what it means to say.

In Lacan’s teaching, however, the proposition “there isn’t any metalanguage” is to be taken literally. It means that all language is in a way an object-language: **there isn’t any language without object.** Even when the language is seemingly caught in a web of self-referential movement, even when it is seemingly speaking only about itself, there is an objective, non-signifying “reference” to this movement. The Lacanian mark of it is, of course, the *objet petit a*. The self-referential movement of the signifier is not that of a closed circle, but an elliptical movement around a certain void. And the *objet petit a* as the “originally lost object,” as the object which in a way coincides with its own loss, is precisely the positivation of this void.

This “internal exclusion” of the object from the Other of the Symbolic network also allows us to expose the confusion upon which the Derridean assumption of the “title-address of the letter” rests (*le titre de la lettre*); that is, the criticism of Lacanian theory in which, according to Derrida, the letter always possesses its title-address, always

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reaches its destination. This is supposed to attest to the “closed economy” of the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic: the central point of reference (the signifier of lack) allegedly precludes the possibility that a letter could go astray, lose its circular-teleological path and miss its address.’ Where does the misunderstanding in this criticism lie? It is true that in Lacanian theory “every letter has its title.” But this title is definitely not some kind of *telos* of its trajectory. The Lacanian “title of the letter” is closer to the title of a picture; for example, that delineated in a well-known joke about “Lenin in Warsaw.” At an art exhibition in Moscow a picture is hung showing Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, in bed with a young member of the Komsomol. The title of the picture is ‘Lenin in Warsaw.’ A bewildered visitor asks a guide: “But where is Lenin?” The guide replies quietly and with dignity: “Lenin is in Warsaw.”

If we put aside the position of Lenin as the absent Third, the bearer of the prohibition of the sexual relationship, we could say that “Lenin in Warsaw” is in a strict Lacanian sense the **object** of this picture. The title names the object which is lacking in the field of what is depicted. That is to say, that in this joke, the trap in which the visitor was caught could be defined precisely as the metalanguage-trap. The mistake of the visitor is to establish the same distance between the picture and the title as between the sign and the denoted object, as if the title is speaking **about** the picture from a kind of “objective distance,” and then to look for its positive correspondent in the picture. Thus, the visitor poses a question: “Where is the object indicated by its title depicted?” But the whole point is, of course, that in this case, the relation between the picture and its title is not the usual one where the title corresponds simply to what is depicted (“Landscape,” “Self-portrait”). Here, the title is, so to speak, on the same surface. It is part of the same continuity as the picture itself. Its distance from the picture is strictly internal, making an incision into the picture itself. That is why something must fall (out) from the picture: not its title, but its object, which is replaced by the title.

In other words, the title of this picture functions as the Freudian **Vorstellungsrepräsentanz**: the representative, the substitute of some representation, the signifying element filling out the vacant place of the missing representation (i.e. of the depiction of Lenin himself). The field of the representation (*Vorstellung*) is the field of what is positively depicted, but the problem is that everything cannot be depicted. Something must necessarily fall out. “Lenin must be in Warsaw,” and the

title takes the place of this void, of this lacking “originally repressed” representation: that is, of the excluded representation that makes possible the positive condition for the emergence of what is being depicted. (Because, *vulgari eloquentia*, if Lenin were not in Warsaw, Nadezhda Krupskaya could not . . .) If we take the word *sujet* in the sense of “content,” we can say that what we have here is precisely the difference *sujet/objet*. “Nadezhda Krupskaya in bed with a young Komsomol-member” is the *sujet* of the picture with “Lenin in Warsaw” being its *objet*.

We can take this as a joke about *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. And now we can also understand why the signifier as such has the status of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* in Lacan. It is no longer the simple Saussurean material representative of the signified, of the mental representation-idea, but the substitute filling out of the void of some originally missing representation which does not bring to mind any representation. It presentifies its lack. The misunderstanding in the poststructuralist criticism of Lacan is ultimately a misunderstanding about the nature of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. This criticism misses the fact that the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (the pure, reflexive signifier incarnating the lack itself) fills out the void of the lost object. As soon as the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is no longer connected to this hole in the Other, to the falling out of the object, it begins to function as a “title”; as a metalanguage-designation, as an incision that limits, totalizes, canalizes the original dispersion of the signifying texture. In short, we find ourselves in a “post-structuralist” mess.

If the joke about Lenin in Warsaw exemplifies the logic of the master-signifier, there is another joke-in a way its symmetrical inversion-which exemplifies the logic of the object: namely the joke about the conscript who tries to evade the military service by pretending he is crazy. His symptom is that he compulsively checks all the bits of paper he can lay his hands on, constantly repeating: “That’s not it!” Soon, he is sent to the military psychiatrist where he also examines all the papers around, including those in the wastepaper basket, repeating all the time: “That’s not it!” The psychiatrist, finally convinced that he really is crazy, gives him a written warrant releasing him from military service. The conscript casts a look at it and says cheerfully: “That’s it!”

We can say that this little bit of paper finally found-a warrant of release-has the status of an object in the Lacanian sense. Why? Because it is an object produced by the signifying texture itself. It is a kind of object that came to exist as a result of all the fuss about it. The

“crazy” conscript pretends to look for something, and through his searching itself, through the repeated failure of it (“That’s not it!”), he produces what he is looking for. The paradox is, then, that the process of searching itself produces the object which causes it: the exact parallel to Lacanian desire which produces its own object-cause. The error of all the people around the conscript, the psychiatrist included, is that they overlook the way they are already part of the “crazy” conscript’s game. They think they are examining him from an objective, metalanguage distance, like the bewildered spectator of the picture “Lenin in Warsaw” who mistook the picture’s title for the metalanguagedescription of its contents. Their error is then symmetrical. In the case of “Lenin in Warsaw” the title is on the same level as the figured contents of the picture and is not a metal language-designation of it. In the second example, the paper as an object is part of the signifying process itself; its product and not its external reference. First we have the paradox of a **signifier** which is a part of the **representation of reality** (filling out a void, a hole in it). Then we have the inverse paradox of **an object** which must be included in the **signifying texture**. Perhaps this double paradox offers us the final clue to the Lacanian proposition: “there is no metalanguage.”

NOTES

1. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne (Zwölf Vorlesungen)*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp/Kno, 1985, pp. 219-247.
2. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale*, Paris: Flammarion, 1980.
3. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil, 1973, p. 198.
4. Cf. Otto Fenichel, “Die ‘lange Nase,’” in *Imago 14 (1928)*, pp. 502-504.
5. Cf. Sem. XL, Jacques Lacan, op. cit., and Jean-Luc Nancy - Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le titre de la lettre*, Paris: Galilée, 1973.